

Activism

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The history of animal activism is rife with controversy about tactics. Some controversies involve pragmatic disagreement about which tactics are most effective. Other controversies involve principled disagreement about which tactics are morally right or wrong, independently of whether or not they are effective. Our focus here will be on pragmatic disagreements in animal activism, as well as on the relationship between animal activism and animal studies.

Some pragmatic disagreements concern what issues activists should address, what goals they should aim for with respect to these issues, and what paths they should take to achieve these goals. For example, can activists do more good overall by focusing on animals in food, research, education, or entertainment? Either way, what is the best outcome that activists can realistically achieve? For instance, in the case of animals in food, should activists aim to regulate this practice to ensure that people treat animals as well as possible, or should they aim to abolish this practice to ensure that people do not harm them at all? Finally, no matter what goal activists select, what is the best way to achieve this goal? For example, should activists aim to bring about their ideal food system through a series of incremental reforms to the current system or through an effort to dismantle the current system and build a new one in its place?

Other pragmatic disagreements concern how activists should engage with the public, as well as with other social movements. For example, can activists do more good overall by advocating primarily for individual behavioral change (for instance through vegan advocacy) or by advocating primarily for structural social, political, and economic change (for instance through advocacy for legal personhood for animals or research and development of cultured meat)? Also, what kind of tone should activists take in their advocacy? Should they take a conciliatory approach, asking people to reduce consumption of animal products? Or should they take a confrontational approach, protesting in spaces where people consume animal products? And, should activists focus exclusively on nonhuman animals in their advocacy, or should they aspire to stand in solidarity with other social movements by working to uproot racism, sexism, ableism, and so on too?

Still other pragmatic disagreements concern what the limits of effective animal activism are. Should activists always follow the law, or should they sometimes break the law by performing open rescues or undercover investigations, even when states have passed laws against that? Moreover, if activists do sometimes break the law, should they always do so civilly, limiting any illegal activity to protest, liberation, and investigation, or should they sometimes do so “uncivilly,” perhaps by engaging in property destruction as well? Finally, if activists do sometimes break the law “uncivilly”, and if (as the vast majority of activists

believe) they should never engage in violence, how can they draw the line between nonviolent and violent direct action in practice? Here activists have to consider not only what counts as violence, but also what political opponents can frame as violence for purposes of representing activists as terrorists.

Academics and activists have been asking these questions about effective animal activism for decades without much progress. Part of the reason for this lack of progress has been lack of evidence about what would in fact be most effective. In the absence of evidence that would decide the matter, it is easy for each side of a debate to construct plausible, albeit speculative, arguments about why their approach is right and other approaches are wrong.¹

Some academics and activists are now attempting to solve this problem by finding and promoting evidence about the effectiveness of different approaches to animal activism. However, evidence-based activism raises concerns as well. One concern is that a commitment to evidence-based activism could lead to a bias in favor of certain types of activism (for example types whose benefits are relatively measurable and/or whose costs are relatively non-measurable) and against certain other types of activism (for example types whose benefits are relatively non-measurable and/or whose costs are relatively measurable). The challenge, then, is to find and promote evidence about effective animal activism while mitigating this risk of measurability bias as much as possible.

Many animal studies scholars find themselves in a dual role concerning this topic, since they are activists as well as academics, and therefore they have a personal as well as professional stake in this discussion.² This dual role has benefits and costs. On one hand, it can motivate one to answer these questions accurately (since one might hope to learn how to do activism effectively) and to draw from personal as well as professional experience while doing so. On the other hand, it can also motivate one to answer questions about effective activism self-servingly (since one might hope to learn that one is already, in fact, doing activism

¹ For a history of the animal advocacy movement, see Phelps 2015. And for general discussion about the ethics of many of the issues mentioned above, see Gruen 2011 and Schlottmann and Sebo forthcoming.

² The authors of this chapter are no exception. We both work in animal activism and animal studies, and we also both work in the effective altruism movement that we will be discussing here. For example, JS has been involved in animal activism since he was a college student, and he is currently a Board Member at Animal Charity Evaluators, Board Member at Minding Animals International, Executive Committee Member at the Animals & Society Institute, and Director of the Animal Studies M.A. Program at New York University. Similarly, PS has a history of activism going back to 1971 when, as a graduate student at the University of Oxford, he organized the first Oxford protest against battery cages and veal crates. He was for many years president of Animal Liberation (Victoria); co-founder and president of the Australian Federation of Animal Societies (now Animals Australia); and co-founder of The Great Ape Project. He was a close advisor to Henry Spira and, after Spira's death, president of Spira's organization, Animal Rights International. He continues to speak at events for animals and is a board or advisory board member of several animal organizations. This work provides us with valuable experience, but it also positions us in this discussion in ways that we need to be mindful of.

effectively) and draw from personal experience more than one should while doing so. We will explore further connections between animal studies and effective animal activism below.

Effective animal activism

Responding to the need for evidence-based activism, a growing number of animal activists are joining forces with effective altruism (EA), a social movement that attempts to use evidence and reason to do the most good possible. The hope is that if animal activists take an evidence-based approach to their work, as EAs do, they can resolve some of the disagreements and dissolve some of the tensions that currently stand in the way of progress in the animal rights movement.

In one sense, EA is a very old idea. A commitment to using evidence and reason to do the most good possible has been implicit in the work of many academics and activists, including those who work on animal issues. But in another sense, EA is a very new idea. In particular, the term ‘effective altruism’, as well as the growing network of organizations explicitly committed to this ideal, is an exclusively 21st century phenomenon.

How do EAs in general, and effective animal activists (EAAs) in particular, attempt to use evidence and reason to do the most good possible? William MacAskill has developed an influential model that invites people to ask several questions (MacAskill 2015).³ On this model, an EAA should first ask about the *scale* of a problem: How much harm does this problem cause relative to other problems? Second, an EAA should ask about *neglectedness*: How much attention are people currently paying to this problem, relative to other problems? Third, an EAA should ask about *tractability*: How much of a difference, if any, are people likely to make on this problem relative to other problems? Finally, an EAA should ask about *personal fit*: What are their personal talents, interests, and background, and how well-suited are they for certain kinds of work? The more harmful, neglected, and tractable a problem is, and the better suited an EAA is for working on this problem, the more an EAA should prioritize working on this problem.

EAAs believe that this framework supports animal activism as a high priority area in general, since animal suffering is a relatively massive, neglected, and tractable issue that many people are well-suited to address. (Other high priority areas include global poverty, climate change, and reducing the risk of the extinction of intelligent life on Earth.)

EAAs also believe that this framework supports some areas in animal activism more than others. For example, Animal Charity Evaluators (ACE) estimates that more than 99 percent of all domesticated animals used and killed by humans are farmed animals, yet farmed animal advocacy organizations receive less than one percent of all donations for domesticated animals used and killed by humans (ACE 2016a). They also estimate that efforts to save or spare companion animals cost several hundred dollars per animal, whereas efforts to save or spare farmed animals cost less than ten cents per animal (ACE 2016b). If these estimates are even roughly accurate, it follows that farmed animal suffering is a massive, neglected, and tractable issue relative to companion animal suffering.

³ For more on the ethics of EA, see Singer 2015. And for case studies of people committed to EA, see MacFarquhar 2015.

For a more complicated example, consider wild animal suffering. On one hand, wild animal suffering is both massive and neglected, making it potentially high priority as well. On the other hand, wild animal suffering is not, at present, as tractable as domesticated animal suffering. Experts do know how to relieve wild animal suffering somewhat, for example by assisting animals with migration, but they do not know how to address the most pressing challenges that wild animals face, such as drought, famine, or predation. Moreover, even modest initiatives such as assisted migration risk interfering in delicately balanced ecosystems in ways that are difficult to predict. As a result, although some EAAs support the idea of researching interventions in wild animal suffering, few people think that they are in a position to responsibly carry out such interventions now.

What about the many other views within animal activism about the most effective strategies to pursue, for example about what kind of tone to strike in animal advocacy or about what kind of education and outreach to engage in? EAAs attempt to resolve disagreements by seeking evidence about their efficacy. One approach involves applying existing evidence about advocacy in general to questions about animal advocacy in particular. Another involves working to gather new evidence about advocacy in general and about animal advocacy in particular. For example, several animal charities are currently funding, conducting, and/or promoting original research on whether and to what degree tactics such as leaflets, online ads, and corporate outreach are an effective tool for persuading people to reduce or eliminate consumption of factory farmed animal products.

We can be confident that if animal activists adopt strategies supported by this research, they can expect to save or spare many animals from suffering.⁴ The more activists engage in vegan advocacy, the more consumers will select vegan options. And, the more activists engage in corporate outreach, the more vegan options consumers will have to select. But do the benefits of these strategies outweigh the costs? That depends on their long-term effects, and these effects are, of course, harder to measure.

Measurability bias

Critics of EAA worry that evidence-based activism has important limits. In particular, they worry that a focus on measurable evidence will bias people in favor of approaches whose benefits are relatively easy to measure and/or whose costs are relatively hard to measure, and against approaches whose benefits are relatively hard to measure and/or whose costs are relatively easy to measure, with negative consequences for the overall composition and impact of the animal rights movement.⁵

For example, consider the contrast between conciliatory and confrontational approaches to animal activism. On the conciliatory side, we can grant that, when the Reductarian

⁴ For information about recent victories animal activists have achieved through strategies supported by this research, see Pitney 2016.

⁵ For discussion of measurability bias in EAA, see Singer and Sullivan 2015. For discussions of measurability bias in EA, see Herzog 2016; Todd, Farquhar, and Mills 2012; Rubenstein 2015; and Srinivasan 2015. And, for discussion of measurability bias in nonprofit organizations, see INCITE! 2009.

Foundation persuades people to reduce their consumption of factory farmed animal products, they do real measurable good in the short term, since they persuade many people to make positive behavioral changes right away. What are the long-term effects? This is harder to say. It might be that the Reducetarian Foundation does real, albeit less measurable, good in the long run as well, by motivating people to gradually change their beliefs, values, and practices over time so that they eventually become less inclined to consume any animal products at all. Or it might be that they do real, albeit less measurable, harm in the long run, by motivating people to think that reducing consumption of factory farmed animals is all that activists need to do in order to treat animals well. Either way, the long-term effects are hard to measure, and so the short-term benefits will be especially salient for activists looking to measurable evidence for guidance.

Meanwhile, on the confrontational side, we can grant that, when Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) activists protest production and consumption of “humane” animal products by chanting “it’s not food, it’s violence” at Chipotle or Whole Foods, they do real measurable harm in the short term, since they alienate potential allies and risk leading potential Chipotle and Whole Foods customers to shop at places with lower welfare standards. What about the long-term effects? Once again, this is harder to say. It might be that DxE does real, albeit less measurable, harm in the long run as well, by motivating people to become even more entrenched in their resistance to animal rights. Or it might be that they do real, albeit less measurable, good in the long run, since the kinds of disruptive tactics that alienate potential allies in the short term also challenge oppressive ideologies, shift the center of debate, and pave the way for radical change in the long run.⁶ Either way, as before, the long-term effects are hard to measure, and so the short-term costs will be especially salient for activists looking to measurable evidence for guidance.

For another example (which sits at the intersection of animal activism and animal studies), consider the contrast between direct and indirect approaches to education and outreach about animal issues. On the direct side, if an EAA wants to know how much of a difference they can make through, say, financial support of leafleting or online advertising, they can calculate the expected impact of this work roughly as follows: They can estimate how many leaflets or online ads they can make possible with each donation, how many people are likely to see these messages, how many of the people who see these messages are likely to go vegan, how many of the people who go vegan are likely to stay vegan, how many animals a vegan is likely to save or spare in a given period of time, and so on. They can then combine these values to calculate how many animals they are likely to save or spare by taking this approach. Granted, there are uncertainties at each stage in this analysis. But even if EAAs make conservative estimates about these impacts, the expected value of leafleting and online ads is likely to be high. This is part of why, for example, ACE evaluates the Humane League and Mercy for Animals so highly: They estimate that both organizations engage in campaigns that likely save or spare multiple animals per dollar spent (ACE 2016c, ACE 2016d).

Meanwhile, on the indirect side, if an EAA wants to know how much of a difference they can make through, say, financial support of animal studies in higher education (which is itself a scholarly rather than an activist enterprise), they cannot calculate the expected impact of their work nearly as easily. Sure, they can calculate how much research, teaching, and

⁶ For discussion of this issue, see Young 2001.

programming they can make possible with each donation, how many people are likely to be exposed to this activity, and so on. But they cannot easily calculate the degree to which this activity will contribute to bringing about the kind of long-term ideological change that they might be hoping for. After all, when activists work to promote animal studies in colleges and universities, they are trying to do more than promote information and arguments about the value of veganism. They are also trying to create space for sustained conversations about the root causes of domination and exploitation of human and nonhuman animals and what, if anything, people can do to bring about a more just, decent society for human and nonhuman animals. And of course, any benefits that flow from this deeper level of engagement will necessarily be long-term, indirect, and diffuse. Thus, any attempt to estimate the impacts of working to promote animal studies in this kind of way is likely to be very difficult.

The general worry, then, is that a focus on measurable evidence risks distorting evaluations about effective animal activism in two related ways: It risks leading people to place too much emphasis on the direct, individual impacts of particular actions, and it risks leading people to place not enough emphasis on the indirect, structural impacts of sets of actions. As a result, it risks biasing assessments in favor of approaches that aim for relatively direct benefits and away from approaches that aim for relatively indirect benefits, and it also risks alienating potential allies who take these latter approaches.

This critique of EAA is an internal critique. It is not an argument against reducing animal suffering as much as possible, or against using evidence and reason in the course of doing so. It is rather an argument that, if one aspires to reduce animal suffering as much as possible and to use evidence and reason in the course of doing so, then one should take care not to focus disproportionately on the direct, individual impacts of particular interventions, since doing so will lead to an incomplete, and likely incorrect, analysis of what animal activists should be doing individually and collectively.

The future of effective animal activism

How can EAAs find, promote, and implement evidence about effective animal activism while mitigating the risk of measurability bias? We have two suggestions. First, EAAs can *improve* their risk-benefit analyses by expanding their methods of assessment, expanding their scope of assessment, and correcting for biases in their assessments. Second, EAAs can *supplement* their risk-benefit analyses with other approaches to reducing animal suffering (approaches which risk-benefit analysis supports at a higher level). We will briefly discuss each of these suggestions in turn.

Here are some ways in which EAAs can improve their risk-benefit analyses.

- *EAAs can expand their methods of assessment.* First, EAAs can consult a wider range of fields than they sometimes do including history and social, political, and economic theory. This will allow EAAs to see the role that particular tactics can play in a broader division of labor within and across social movements. For example, historical studies of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the LGBTQ+ movement, and more allow one to see how conciliatory and confrontational approaches to activism can interact in ways that make the whole different from and greater than the sum of its parts. Historical studies also allow us to see how the emergence of new academic fields can correspond to increased engagement with the topics that they address, even if the causal pathways are difficult to detect. Of course,

ideally EAAs would be able to combine assessments of individual approaches and assessments of sets of approaches into a single, unified judgment about what activists should do to help animals as effectively as possible. It might be difficult to do this work well, but it is not impossible to do so. In the meantime, making both kinds of assessments available so that people can make up their own minds is a good first step.

- *EAAs can expand their scope of assessment.* Second, EAAs can apply these expanded methods of assessment to a wider range of questions than they sometimes do, including questions about approaches whose benefits are difficult to measure. For example, even if one might not currently be able to reliably compare conciliation with confrontation or direct with indirect education and outreach, one might at least be able to reliably compare interventions *within* each category. For instance, one can look to the history of confrontational activism (or conduct experiments in confrontational activism) for guidance about how to preserve the expected long-term benefits of this approach while mitigating the risk of alienating people in the short term. Similarly, one can look to the history of other interdisciplinary fields (or look at the limited evidence currently available about animal studies as an interdisciplinary field) for guidance about how to develop animal studies in an intrinsically and instrumentally valuable way. Of course, these kinds of studies might not tell particular individuals whether to engage in these approaches in the first place. But they might at least provide them with partial guidance about how to engage in these approaches insofar as they choose to do so.

- *EAAs can correct for biases in their assessments.* Third, as Jennifer Rubenstein and Amia Srinivasan have suggested, EAAs can consider how the history and demographics of the animal rights and effective altruist movements might be limiting their perspective (Rubenstein 2015 and Srinivasan 2015). For example, many EAAs have relatively privileged identities and backgrounds. Does that make them more trusting of current social, political, and economic systems than they should be? If so, then they have reason to expand their demographics, and discount their intuitions in favor of systems from which their current demographics benefit, accordingly. Relatedly, EAAs can consider whether and how observational biases might be shaping their collection and interpretation of evidence. For instance, are they unduly influenced by the streetlight effect, i.e. the tendency to look for answers where they are more apparent; the availability heuristic, i.e. the tendency to rely on familiar examples; and/or selection bias, i.e. a bias that results from selecting unrepresentative samples? If so, then they have reason to question their reliance on leafleting, online ads, and other tactics whose benefits are relatively familiar and measurable. Granted, these corrections might not eliminate measurability bias in effective animal activism. But they can at least reduce this bias, and if they do, that will be a step in the right direction.

Our second suggestion is that, as Jasmin Singer and Mariann Sullivan have suggested, EAAs can supplement their risk-benefit analyses with other approaches to reducing animal suffering (approaches which risk-benefit analysis supports at a higher level) (Singer and Sullivan 2015). Compare: John Stuart Mill, whose impartial, benevolent, pragmatic moral theory partly inspired the EAA movement, argued that if people want to promote good outcomes as individuals, then they should not attempt to promote good outcomes with each and every action they perform. Instead, they should often proceed indirectly, by thinking about which rules and character traits will lead them to promote good outcomes overall, and then following those rules and cultivating those character traits for the most part in everyday life (Mill 1861/2002). Similarly, he argued that if people want to make use of the state to promote good outcomes, then they should not attempt to have the state impose a particular way of life

on citizens. Instead, they should proceed indirectly, by thinking about what kind of political society will lead citizens to live well overall, and then attempting to have the state bring about that kind of political society (Mill 1859/1978). This is why Mill advocated, on utilitarian grounds, a liberal, pluralistic state. Yes, in a liberal, pluralistic state, people will disagree about what to do and some people will make bad decisions. But they can also experiment with different ways of living, learning from each other and making more progress over time than they would if the state imposed a single, unified vision of how to live on everybody.

We believe that EAA would benefit from a similarly indirect approach. In particular, if animal activists want to reduce animal suffering as much as possible, then they should not attempt to save or spare the most animals possible with each and every action they perform. Instead, they should often proceed indirectly, by thinking about what kinds of approaches will lead people to save or spare the most animals overall, and then engaging in these approaches for the most part in everyday life and promoting these approaches for the most part within the animal movement.

What would the animal movement look like if people took this more indirect approach? In our view, it would be an informed, rational movement in which activists engage in direct risk-benefit analysis much more than they do now (which is why, we think, EAAs are correct to focus on the value of this approach in the short term). But it would also be a liberal, pluralistic movement in which activists take other approaches too, within certain limits (which is why, we think, it would be a mistake for EAAs to focus exclusively on the value of direct risk-benefit analysis in the long run). In a liberal, pluralistic EAA movement, activists will disagree about what to do and some activists will make bad decisions. But they can also experiment with different forms of activism, learning from each other and making more progress over time than they would if they all followed a single, unified vision of how to reduce animal suffering.

With that said, we must qualify our support for pluralism in two ways. First, it does not extend to the use of violence on behalf of animals. This is a position for which one of us (PS) has consistently argued since the 1970s. Despite support for this view from many leaders of the early animal rights movement, including Henry Spira, in the 1980s the movement suffered a significant setback when a handful of incidents carried out by a tiny minority made it possible for political opponents to brand all animal activists as “terrorists”.⁷ The accusation was absurd, but nevertheless damaging. In the present climate, violence would be even more disastrous.⁸ Individuals or organizations sanctioning violence as a practical strategy for achieving animal liberation cannot be tolerated within a movement that is seeking to

⁷ Perhaps the most dramatic of these actions occurred in November 1982, when an organization calling itself the Animal Rights Militia mailed letter bombs to UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the government minister responsible for overseeing animal experimentation, and to the leaders of the three main opposition parties. No one was injured by these devices. Two years later, the same organization placed explosive devices under the cars of two scientists who used animals in experiments. Both vehicles were damaged beyond repair. For further incidents, see the Wikipedia entry on the Animal Rights Militia. And for the use of the label “terrorism,” see Miller 2006.

⁸ For more, see Potter 2011.

persuade the general public that living an ethical life is incompatible with the violence of eating animals or of other kinds of animal use.⁹

The second point is that participants in a pluralist movement should draw a clear line between those who are defending the continuing abuse of animals – essentially, factory farmers, breeders and users of laboratory animals, users of captive animals for education and entertainment, and so on – and those who are on the side of the animals. Being part of a pluralist movement means, of course, that people can disagree about strategy with other members of the same movement. Animal activists can and should air these disagreements respectfully at the appropriate occasions. They should not, however, become so consumed by these differences that, instead of focusing most of their limited resources on the exploiters of animals, they focus most of these resources instead attacking those who are, from a broader perspective, allies in the struggle for animal liberation.

In any case, as we indicated above, the need for moderate pluralism within EAA is not especially pressing at the moment, since EAAs still represent a minority of animal activists. As a result, any measurability bias that exists within EAA has not yet led to a similar measurability bias in the broader animal rights movement. Indeed, if anything the broader animal rights movement still has a bias *against* measurability, since, for example, people still donate much more to companion animal organizations than to farmed animal organizations, in spite of the fact that farmed animals still experience much more suffering than companion animals do. But as EAA grows in prominence, it will become more pressing for people in this branch of the animal rights movement to strike an internal balance between direct and indirect approaches to animal activism – and since this will be difficult to do, academics and activists should start thinking about these issues now.

A challenge for animal studies scholars interested in animal activism, then, is to think about how academic research, teaching, and service regarding animals can contribute directly and indirectly to efforts to help animals as effectively as possible. As observers of the movement, animal studies scholars can engage by evaluating different strategies for helping animals, examining possible biases in these evaluations, and examining possible biases in these examinations. Meanwhile, as participants in the movement, animal studies scholars may or may not think that academic work is the most effective means that they have for helping animals (and they may or may not think that they should be evaluating their work primarily against this standard in the first place). Either way, if our discussion here is correct, then we can at least say this much: It would be unreasonable for EAAs to dismiss animal studies simply on the grounds that the value of this work is difficult to measure, and it would also be unreasonable for animal studies scholars to dismiss EAA simply on the grounds that evidence-based activism risks measurability bias. Instead, academics and activists should work together to arrive at an informed, rational, and balanced perspective about how to do the most good for animals possible.

Further Reading

⁹ For discussion about the nature and ethics of violence, see Regan 2004.

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